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Judaism at Dura - Europolos

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Summer, 1964), pp. 81-102

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1061873>

Accessed: 09/01/2012 18:34

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*Jacob Neusner*

J U D A I S M  
A T  
D U R A - E U R O P O S

When the painted walls of the synagogue at Dura-Europos emerged into the light of day in November, 1932, the modern perspective on the character of Judaism in Greco-Roman times had to be radically refocused. Until that time, it was possible to ignore the growing evidence, turned up for decades by archaeologists, of a kind of Judaism substantially different from that described in Jewish literary remains of the period. Those remains specifically contained in the Talmud and Midrash were understood to describe an aniconic, ethically, and socially oriented religion, in which the ideas of Hellenistic religions, particularly mystery religions, played little or no part. Talmudic Judaism had, by then, been authoritatively described in such works as George Foot Moore's *Judaism*, and no one had reason to expect that within what was called "normative Judaism" one would uncover phenomena he might, in other settings, have interpreted as "gnostic" or mystical or eschatological in orientation. It is true that archaeological discoveries had long before revealed in the synagogues and graves of Jews in the Hellenistic worlds substantial evidences of religious syncretism, and of the use of pagan symbols in identifiably Jewish settings. But before the Dura synagogue these evidences remained discrete and made slight impact. They were not explained; they were explained away.

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After the preliminary report, the Dura synagogue was widely discussed, and a considerable literature, mostly on specific problems of art but partly on the interpretation of the art, developed; in the main, the Dura synagogue was studied by art historians, and not, with notable exceptions, by historians of religion or of Judaism. When, in 1956, Carl H. Kraeling published *The Synagogue*,<sup>1</sup> it seemed that no substantial revision of earlier ideas on Judaism at this period would be required. Kraeling argued that the paintings might be interpreted for the most part by reference to the so-called rabbinic literature of the period, and impressively used the talmudic, midrashic, and targumic writings for that purpose. He writes (pp. 353, 354):

The Haggadic tradition embodied in the Dura synagogue paintings was, broadly speaking, distinct from the one that was normative for Philo and for that part of the ancient Jewish world that he represents. . . . This particular cycle [of paintings] as it is known to us at Dura moves within a definable orbit of the Haggadic tradition, . . . this orbit has Palestinian-Babylonian rather than Egyptian relations.

Kraeling's method and conclusions are re-examined, and a wholly different method, leading to quite other conclusions, is proposed by Erwin R. Goodenough in the newest volumes of *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, which have just appeared.<sup>2</sup> My purpose here is, first, to contrast the findings of Kraeling and Goodenough on a number of specific, suggestive problems; second, to summarize the general picture of Dura Judaism described by each; and, finally, to offer a historian's judgment on the issues at hand.

### I. THE PROBLEM OF METHOD

While an argument in abstract terms can yield at best only imprecise insights, Kraeling and Goodenough disagree so diametrically on the basic issue of how to interpret the art that at the outset one may usefully articulate their differences.

Kraeling argues that the biblical references of the Dura paintings are so obvious that one may begin by reading the Bible, and proceed by reading the paintings in the light of the Bible and its

<sup>1</sup> A. R. Bellinger, F. E. Brown, A. Perkins, and C. B. Welles (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, Final Report*, Vol. VIII, Pt. 1: *The Synagogue* by Carl H. Kraeling, with contributions by C. C. Torrey, C. B. Welles, and B. Geiger (New Haven, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Vols. IX, X, XI: *Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue* (New York, 1963).

midrashic interpretation in the talmudic period. He says (p. 351):

Any community decorating its House of Assembly with material so chosen and so orientated cannot be said to have regarded itself . . . remote from religious life and observance of the Judaism that we know from the Bible and the Mishnah. . . . It would appear [p. 352] that there is a considerable number of instances in which Targum and Midrash have influenced the pictures.

Kraeling provides numerous examples of such influence. He qualifies his argument, however, by saying that the use of midrashic and targumic material is "illustrative rather than definitive." While he makes reference, from time to time, to comparative materials, Kraeling does not in the main feel it necessary to examine the broad iconographic traditions operating in Dura in general, and most manifestly in the synagogue art, for he holds that whatever conventions of pagan art may appear, the meaning of the synagogue art is wholly separated from such conventions and can best, probably only, be understood within the context of the Judaism known to us from literary sources.

Goodenough's argument, repeated in the newest volumes from the earlier ones, is that literary traditions would not have led us to expect any such art as this. We may find statements in talmudic literature which are relevant to the art, but we must in any case after assembling the material determine

what this art means in itself, before we begin to apply to it as proof texts any possible unrelated statements of the Bible or the Talmud. That these artifacts are unrelated to proof texts is a statement which one can no more make at the outset than one can begin with the assumption of most of my predecessors that if the symbols had meaning for Jews, that meaning must be found by correlating them with talmudic and biblical phrases [IV, 10].

Goodenough argues, therefore, that talmudic literature would not lead us to expect the appearance of this kind of art at all. We should search in vain in its pages for the origin of creative exploitation of the kinds of pagan imagery widespread in Jewish synagogues and sarcophagi and, now, additionally, in the Dura synagogue. The rabbis of the Talmud may have *tolerated* certain limited exemplars of pagan art; but they would not have *initiated* its use, and in their literature, one may, therefore, hardly find the interpretive principles which illumined the mind of those Jews who did use it. On the other hand, archaeological remains from other places, if carefully examined, would most certainly have led us to less astonishment than exhibited when Dura was uncovered,

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and than has continually been displayed wherever and whenever archaeologists unfamiliar with the great corpus of Jewish use of pagan conventions have uncovered pagan art in Jewish settings. Goodenough therefore denies at the outset that literary explanations may be attached to this, or any other Jewish art in antiquity, unless those explanations take into account what the particular symbols meant within the context of other cultures from which they were obviously borrowed.

Goodenough's argument against the use of "proof texts" is supported by Morton Smith in "The Image of God."<sup>3</sup> Smith points out,

Discussions of the hellenization of ancient Judaism often take for granted that any material for which precedent can be found in the Old Testament is therefore independent of Hellenistic influence. This supposition neglects the fact that rabbinic literature is almost entirely homiletic and legal. Preachers and lawyers must find proof-texts in certain books which are authoritative for their purposes. But they do not necessarily get their ideas from those books to which they must go for their proof-texts. . . . Of course, proof-texts sometimes do happen to contain the ideas attributed to them. But even when they do, the taking up and development of ideas by later writers may be evidence of outside influence. . . . In such instances as these, the preacher who comes to the Bible looking for a proof-text happens to find a good one, one which really says what he wants said. But this does not alter the fact that he finds it because he looks for it, and he looks for it because of the practices or ideas which have become important in the world around him. Therefore when we discuss the influences at work on a religion we must look first of all to the world around it, its immediate environment [pp. 473, 474, 481].

Thus, even though the art of the Dura synagogue may at the first glance seem to be *related* to midrashic ideas, even found in a few cases to reflect midrashic accounts of biblical events, nonetheless one is still not freed from the obligation to consider what that art meant to a contemporary Jew, pagan, or Christian who was familiar with other art of the age. Since both the architectural and the artistic conventions of the Dura synagogue are demonstrably those of the place and age, and not in any way borrowed from pre-existent "rabbinic" artistic conventions—because there weren't any!—one must give serious thought to the meaning and value, or the content, of those conventions elsewhere and assess, so far as one can, how nearly that value and meaning were preserved in the Jewish setting.

<sup>3</sup> "The Image of God: Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with Especial Reference to Goodenough's Work on Jewish Symbols," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XL, No. 2 (1958), pp. 473-512.

Both Kraeling and Goodenough agree that there was a plan to the art of the synagogue, and that biblical scenes are portrayed not only as mere ornament or decoration but as a means of conveying important religious ideas, so that the walls of the sanctuary might, in truth, yield sermons. Before considering the content of those "sermons," we may usefully turn to specific points of disagreement in interpretation so that we may, in the whole, recognize the more concrete role of the interpretation of the parts.

## II. SPECIFIC POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

The methodological difference between Goodenough and Kraeling on how to interpret the art may be best illustrated by considering specific cases. Here we shall consider three examples. What will become clear, it seems to me, is that Goodenough demands explanation for a far greater number and variety of details; he sees more in the art and asks more about it. Kraeling uses, in the main, a single body of literature, while Goodenough ranges far and wide in his search for ideas and artistic conventions relevant to Dura synagogue art. Whether we are better off on that account or not may only be decided on the basis of the results. My purpose here is to summarize a very small part of their respective treatments. The reader will, if his interest is aroused, need to turn to the works of the two scholars and, most of all, to the art itself.

### A. ORPHEUS/DAVID

Across the middle of the reredos on the west wall of the synagogue is painted a figure of Orpheus playing to the animals (Fig. 1). Both Goodenough and Kraeling call the figure "David," although the kinds of animals surrounding him are in dispute.

Goodenough (IX, 93-94) turns, therefore, to the figure of Orpheus, and asks what it was about the pagan Orpheus which prompted Jews (and Christians) to borrow the figure. The figure of Orpheus represented the power of divine song to quiet human savagery. Kraeling (224-25) agrees;

There can be no doubt that Orpheus has served the artist in part at least as the model of the representation. . . . The question whether an allusion to Orpheus charming the beasts was intended . . . can be answered properly only in the light of the purpose the artist had in mind introducing the figure of the musician. . . . The lyre-player must be David, the classic historical representative of the "kings . . . in the house of Judah." . . . In view of the uncertainties about many of the details of the area, the only inference that can safely be drawn from the upper part of the Lower Center Panel about the influence of the Orpheus

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tradition upon the Synagogue paintings is that the artist fell back upon the best-known and most appropriate of the many clichés for musicians as a happy device for portraying David in the role assigned to him by II Sam. 22.

Goodenough goes on, however, to raise questions Kraeling does not raise (IX, 94):

Primarily why did the artist want to put David as the tamer just here? We have seen that the original vine or tree growing from a vase was changed to make more explicit the symbolic and ritualistic implications of the vase. . . . Granted that Orpheus was thought to be David, what did David mean to the congregation that with his animals he could have been put thus in the center of the tree?

To answer this question, Goodenough turns, as he does frequently in Volumes IX–X, to the writings of Hellenistic Judaism, and to Philo in particular. He finds that Philo regarded David as a *thespios* man, which means “one who is superhuman to the point of being divine.” Goodenough, however, holds that the figure of the mystic musician was primary and his identification with David secondary. He points out that the design as a whole denotes nothing historically or biblically objective. David alone could have been designated very clearly, as other figures such as Aaron are, by writing his name by the drawing. This was not done, and it is reasonable to suggest that David the singer in *this* setting and according to *these* conventions may be illuminated by references from other besides Jewish literature. Goodenough cites Hellenistic Jewish writings in which Orpheus was regarded as having drawn his mystery entirely from Moses and shows that Orphic material was prized among Jews. He alludes also to the *merkavah* mysticism (which, we shall see, was probably a characteristic of Babylonian Judaism at this period) and holds that the reredos painting represents (IX, 103) an adumbration of the merkavah vision:

David, who as Orpheus, plays his music and tames birds and beasts in the great tree-vine that leads up to the Throne of the Three. . . .

It must be obvious to the reader that he cannot decide, on the basis of this brief summary, “who is right.” But it must be equally obvious that two wholly different perspectives have come to bear on the figure of David-Orpheus, one unwilling to pursue the meaning, if any, *behind* the use of the conventions of pagan art, and the other eager to do so.

In register C of the west wall, numbered by Kraeling WC4, is a painting of the discovery of the infant Moses (Fig. 2). Goodenough's and Kraeling's descriptive titles of the panel are given above.

The female figures in this panel are identified by Kraeling (p. 173) with the two midwives of the Exodus narrative, and the third woman represents Jochebed, the mother of Moses (p. 174) depositing her infant son in the ark. If correct

it implies that the artist has acted quite drastically and fearlessly in placing in two planes two consecutive scenes whose actions clash so violently with each other; the one showing the Pharaoh issuing the orders for the destruction of the Hebrew infants, the other showing Moses' mother saving her child from Pharaoh's anger . . . the resultant composition is not without an element of irony in exhibiting the futility of the king's efforts.

The upper portion of the scene portrays the princess' attendants, three in number. They carry the princess' toilet accessories, a small gold jug, a bowl, and a paneled ivory casket. In the foreground the scene shows the "daughter of Pharaoh" finding the child Moses in the ark. She stands up to her thighs in the water. Princess and child are both nude. Of course, Kraeling points out (p. 177) that it was the *handmaid* of Pharaoh's daughter who fetched the child, but, he says,

It can be explained . . . by assuming that the artist depended upon the Targumic version for his inspiration, for in the Targum Onkelos the statement "she sent her handmaid to fetch it" is rendered "she stretched out her arm and seized it."

In the panel, however, the daughter of Pharaoh, actually standing in the water, does not appear to have "stretched out her arm"; she is actually holding the baby while *standing* in the water, the baby being "cradled" in her outstretched arm. The intent of the Targum would seem to me to be that the woman, kneeling on the bank, stretched out her arm to receive the child so as not to get into the water; in any case, the Targum does not imply that she got into the water. Here, one is struck first by the fact that she is *standing* in the water and that her position there is not accounted for by desire to fetch the child, whom she holds.

Goodenough's discussion (I, 198-226) of the discovery of Moses begins with the assertion that the "princess" of Kraeling is in fact a divine figure, and that the representations of the goddess Anahita with her female attendants are so similar that one may



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clearly identify the woman who finds and exalts the baby with that divinity. This assertion is in no way tendentious; Goodenough cites numerous instances of paintings of Anahita (Fig. 3) in which important details of the painting before us are found. Anahita was, Goodenough adds, no mere iconographic cliché, but one of the most popular deities of the period in Iran. She was associated by the Greeks with the Great Mother and Aphrodite; further, Goodenough points out, the female in the Nile is very much the Aphrodite type:

Not only in general Sasanian tradition . . . but in a house practically adjacent to the synagogue we have a figure of Aphrodite-Anahita who in general outline, hair, and the position of her hands startlingly resembles the figure who takes the baby from the ark.

The baby himself "just as startlingly resembles the Eros beside Aphrodite in the position of his hands." Goodenough argues, therefore, that a contemporary observer could not have missed the resemblance. The three maids, moreover, are in fact nymphs, and "present so striking an invasion of a pagan element into the biblical scene that we must stop to go thoroughly into the matter to demonstrate that these actually are the nymphs, and to ascertain what their presence would have implied for the interpretation of the biblical incident."

As always, Goodenough then amasses a majestic array of comparative material and shows that the nymphs who wash a baby, in both pagan and Christian usage, "indicate that the baby was a god in the pagan sense." On this basis, Goodenough concludes:

the master designer at Dura introduced the Nymphs deliberately and skilfully into the scene of the infant Moses and did so in order to intensify the notion that Anahita-Aphrodite was drawing from the water a Wunderkind with royal nature at least "hedged" with divinity.

Goodenough says, in this instance as in numerous others, that what we have before us is an example of the adoption of Greek and Iranian conventions "only to show that Judaism, when properly understood, presents all religious values, even the pagan values, better than the pagans themselves." Goodenough then expounds the view of Moses held by Hellenistic Judaism, as exemplified by Philo in particular and shows that, in Philo, Moses emerges as a supreme, royal character and, at birth, was a divine child:

The evidence seems to lead to the following conclusion: In Hellenized Jewish tradition the great biblical heroes began as wunderkinder, extraordinary in their conception, effulgence, beauty, and precocity.

These perquisites of the Wunderkinder were given them by the Nymphs or Graces, the flowing Grace of God. . . . In Hellenistic tradition a Wunderkind becomes normally a god or king or both, and the symbolic tradition for representing this was by having him washed by the spirit-filled water of the Nymphs. The tradition went over into the Hellenized Jewish art, where it was used for both Moses and David, and later adopted by Christians for the births of Mary and Christ. The same tradition explicitly appears in the Dura painting of the infancy of Moses, though adopted more skillfully to the biblical narrative than in the Octateuchs.

Thus the painting portrays a Hellenized Jewish idea, that Moses was a Wunderkind, of royal nature, and as such he could go to Sinai, get the Law, and give it to the people. "Nothing in pictorial design could have proclaimed his character more specifically than to have him drawn from water by Aphrodite and presented by her to the nymphs, and finally, held up for adoration in his own right."

There can be no more concrete example of the contrast between Goodenough's and Kraeling's approaches. If Kraeling had considered and refuted the kinds of evidences Goodenough regards as relevant, one might be in a clearer position to evaluate his explanation. But where Goodenough provides an abundance of comparative material, both artistic and literary, on the basis of which to evaluate his interpretations, Kraeling provides only a single verse of the Targum, and that, to my way of reading it, by no means conclusive. One may continually say that the use of pagan art is wholly conventional, just as the critics of Goodenough's earlier interpretations repeat that the symbols from graves and synagogues were "mere ornament" and imply nothing more than a desire to decorate (none, surely can say this of Dura, and no one has, for the meaningful character of Dura synagogue art is so self-evident as to obviate the need to argue it). But having asserted that pagan art has lost its value and become, in a Jewish setting, wholly conventional, is one better off? Does one therefore understand *why* pagan conventions were useful for decoration? Is the matter to be reduced to a mere accident of taste? If so, one would have to take far less seriously than Kraeling does the phenomena of Dura synagogue art.

#### C. THE STAFF OF MOSES/CLUB OF HERACLES

When Moses led Israel out of Egypt, he carried, as everyone knows, a staff (Fig. 4). In Dura, however, the staff is portrayed as no shepherd's staff ever was; it is a club. This is on the west wall,

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Kraeling's listing as Panel WA3. That this *is* Moses is indicated by a *titulus* between the legs of the first figure of Moses, "Moses when he went out from Egypt and cleft the sea."

The figure of Moses standing ready to strike the sea Goodenough (X, 119–25) associates with Heracles, and he examines the value of the figure of Heracles in contemporary religion and provides an interpretation of what that figure, identified with Moses, would have meant to Dura Jewry. The identification of Moses' "rod" with the club of Heracles is established by Goodenough first, by pointing out that it is not a wand, as it is portrayed elsewhere (Fig. 5), but a club, and second, by showing that only two characters, Theseus and Heracles, ever carry a club (Fig. 6):

There can be no doubt . . . that this identification of Moses' rod with the club of Theseus and Heracles was intentional, and so strange an identification seems to indicate that Moses was the Jewish Theseus-Heracles. . . . The knobby club especially marked these heroes, and since they alone of all mythological figures carry or use it, the artist could have put it into Moses' hands only because of its immediate symbolic reference to their special characters and to his.

Actually, the "club" appears in other Jewish remains. Heracles, for his part, was very popular in the East, being worshiped widely and associated with numerous other hero-gods. Moses, Goodenough holds, was the Ares-Heracles of Judaism, and his function and nature "were properly characterized by showing him with the club in this setting." Further, Philo's interpretation of the migration, which harmonizes with the painting, is as a "renunciation of the flesh and pleasure . . . the *agōn* with their own lower natures. . . . It is interesting to see that Philo knew also the appropriateness of Heracles to symbolize this struggle."

I am unable to find that Kraeling says more about the rod/club than (p. 81) that Moses carries a "long, knobby staff."

The second and third cases which we have considered suggest to Goodenough that Moses was more than a merely human figure to the Jews of Dura-Europos. If one begins with the widespread assumption that "Jewish artists . . . reveal themselves as immune to all intrusions of Hellenistic god-man ideas, although the Jews were willing to thank the kings as protectors in a charismatic sense,"<sup>4</sup> then one must reject out of hand the kind of conclusions to which Goodenough comes. However, it seems to me that this statement is based not on a close, detailed, and careful reading of

<sup>4</sup> F. Taeger, *Charisma* (Stuttgart, 1953), I, 304.

the Jewish artifacts, but on a philosophical, and anachronistic view of what "normative" and monolithic Judaism seemed to its examiners in much later ages to have been. If the Jews represented some of their heroes in garb normally reserved, conventionally, to pagan gods when in pagan settings, one must at least be open to the possibility that the Jewish heroes were believed, by the Jews, to have divine qualities. No one has argued, least of all Goodenough, that the Jews were pagans in a Jewish idiom. But it seems reasonable to accept the possibility that the Jews learned something from pagans and that, when they borrowed the artistic and religious conventions of their neighbors, the value, though obviously not the verbal explanation, these conventions bore for the pagan continued to retain meaning for Jews. It is true in the case of Moses that in talmudic literature Moses is belittled. But it is equally true, as Smith showed in "Images of God," that the divine-human idea was most certainly found in Jewish art *and in talmudic literature*; for example, that "the saint (the perfect man) is the image of God, and that the cosmos, also perfect, is the image of God, and that the Menorah, the image of God, was also the image of both saint and cosmos" (p. 508). We know that in the burial place of some rabbis, Bet Shearim, the figure of a man with a menorah on his head is found, and one can hardly interpret such iconographic evidence rightly if one assumes at the very outset that the divine-human man, or a symbol that the divinity may rest on man, will *never* be found in Jewish remains "because the Jews were 'immune' to all such intrusions of Hellenistic god-man ideas"! If one is open to the possibility that Moses may appear in a more than human dimension, then Goodenough's interpretations of the birth scene and the club/rod do not greatly contradict other information we have; are based, in fact, upon widespread and well-attested conventions; and from the evidence of the general plausibility of a Jewish man-god figure uncovered by Smith in talmudic literary evidences, appear to be at least as plausible explanations as we are likely to come by. All this, moreover, ignores the *facts* of Hellenistic Jewish literature, in which, Goodenough shows, Moses *does* appear as a god-man figure.

### III. JUDAISM AT DURA: GENERAL POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

If we had begun with a statement of Kraeling's and Goodenough's views of Dura Judaism, without a preliminary examination of some specific problems of interpretation, it seems to me wholly

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likely that Kraeling's view, and not Goodenough's, would have prevailed. Having seen in three specific instances, however, adumbrations of the very solid basis upon which Goodenough bases his general assertions (in fact, the specific analysis of the art far outweighs the generalizations in both Kraeling's and Goodenough's studies), the reader will be more likely to take seriously a radical reinterpretation of the whole.

Here I shall let the scholars speak for themselves, first, on the general meaning which emerges from the paintings as a whole and, second, on the nature of Judaism at Dura.

While both scholars interpret the pictures in detail, each provides a summary of the meaning of the art as a whole. Kraeling's is as follows (pp. 350-51):

A closer examination of the treatment of Israel's sacred history as presented in the Synagogue painting leads to a number of inferences that will help to appraise the community's religious outlook. . . . These include the following:

a. There is a very real sense in which the paintings testify to an interest in the actual continuity of the historical process to which the sacred record testifies. This is evidenced by the fact that they do not illustrate interest in the Covenant relationship by a combination of scenes chosen from some one segment of sacred history, but provide instead a well-organized progression of scenes from the period of the Patriarchs and Moses and Aaron, from the early days of the monarchy, through the prophetic period, the exile, the post-exile period, to the expected Messianic age as visualized by prophecy. . . .

b. There is a very real sense in which the history portrayed in the paintings involves not only certain individuals, but concretely the nation as a whole, and in which the course of events in time and space are for the individuals and the nation a full and completely satisfactory expression of their religious aspirations and ideals. . . .

c. There is a very real sense in which the piety exhibited in, and inculcated by, the paintings finds a full expression in the literal observance of the Law. This comes to light in the effort to provide the historical documentation for the origin of the religious festivals . . . in the attention paid to the cult and its sacra, including the sacrifices: and in the opposition to idolatry.

d. Because they have this interest in the historical process, in the people of Israel, and in the literal observance of the Law, the paintings can and do properly include scenes showing how those nations and individuals that oppose God's purposes and His people are set at naught or destroyed. . . .

In other words, the religious problem which the synagogue paintings reflect is not that of the individual's search for participation in true being by the escape of the rational soul from the irrational desires to a higher level of mystical experience, but rather that of faithful participation in the nation's inherited Covenant responsibilities as a means of

meriting the fulfillment of the divine promises and of making explicit in history its divinely determined purpose.

Goodenough's interpretation of the whole west wall follows (X, 137-38):

The west wall of the synagogue as a whole is indeed coming to express a profoundly consistent Judaism. On the left side a miraculous baby is given by Elijah, but he ties in with the temporal hopes of Israel, exemplified when Persian rulership was humiliated by Esther and Mordecai. Divine intervention brings this about, but here brought only this. Above is the cosmic interpretation of the Temple sacrifice of Aaron, and Moses making the twelve tribes into the zodiac itself.

On the right, just as consistently, the immaterial, metaphysical values of Judaism are presented. Moses is the divine baby here, with the three nymphs and Anahita-Aphrodite. Kingship, as shown in the anointing of David by Samuel, is not temporal royalty, but initiation into the hieratic seven. Above these, the gods of local paganism collapse before the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of metaphysical reality in Judaism, which the three men beside the ark also represented, while that reality is presented in a temple with seven walls and closed inner sanctuary, and with symbols from the Creation myth of Iran. At the topic, Moses leads the people out to true spiritual victory.

In the four portraits, an incident from the life of Moses is made the culmination of each of these progressions. He goes out as the cosmic leader to the heavenly bodies alongside the cosmic worship of Aaron, the menorah, and the zodiac. He reads the mystic law like the priest of Isis alongside the closed Temple and the all-conquering Ark. He receives the Law from God on Sinai beside a Solomon scene which we cannot reconstruct: but he stands at the Burning Bush, receiving the supreme revelation of God as Being, beside the migrating Israelites, who move . . . to a comparable, if not the same, goal.

The reader must be struck by the obvious fact that, in the main, both scholars agree on the substance of the paintings, though they disagree on both their interpretation and their implications for the kind of religion characteristic of this particular synagogue.

Concerning Dura Judaism, Kraeling argues that the Jews of Dura had fallen back "visibly" upon the biblical sources of religious life (p. 351). Kraeling says throughout that the Jews in Dura were, for the most part, good, "normative," rabbinic Jews:

If our understanding of the pictures is correct, they reveal on the part of those who commissioned them an intense, well-informed devotion to the established traditions of Judaism, close contact with both the Palestinian and the Babylonian centers of Jewish religious thought, and a very real understanding of the peculiar problems and needs of a community living in a strongly competitive religious environment, and in an exposed political position [p. 335].

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Goodenough, in his description of Judaism at Dura (X, 196–209), holds that these were not participants in the “established traditions of Judaism,” and that they did not have close contact with Babylonian or Palestinian Judaism (he follows the general view of Babylonian Judaism as “rabbinic,” which I shall question below). The walls of the synagogue are not, he argues, representations of biblical scenes, but *allegorizations* of them (as in the specific instances cited above). The biblical scenes show an acceptance of mystic ideas which the symbolic vocabulary of Jews elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world, studied in the first eight volumes, suggested. He says (p. 205):

While the theme of the synagogue as a whole might be called the celebration of the glory and power of Judaism and its God, and was conceived and planned by men intensely loyal to the Torah, those people who designed it did not understand the Torah as did the rabbis in general. Scraps stand here which also appear in rabbinic haggadah, to be sure. . . . But in general the artist seems to have chosen biblical scenes not to represent them but, by allegorizing them, to make them say much not remotely implicit in the texts. . . . On the other hand, the paintings can by no means be spelled out from the pages of Philo's allegories, for especially in glorifying temporal Israel they often depart from him altogether. Kraeling astutely indicated . . . that we have no trace of the creation stories, or indeed of any biblical passages before the sacrifice of Isaac, sections of the Bible to which Philo paid almost major attention. This must not blind us, however, to the fact that the artist, like Philo, presumed that the Old Testament text is to be understood not only through its Greek translation, but through its reevaluation in terms of Greek philosophy and religion. Again, unlike Philo in detail but like him in spirit, the artists have interpreted biblical tradition by using Iranian costumes and such scenes as the duel between the white and black horsemen. . . . The Jews here, while utterly devoted to their traditions and Torah, had to express what this meant to them in a building designed to copy the inner shrine of a pagan temple, filled with images of human beings and Greek and Iranian divinities, and carefully designed to interpret the Torah in a way profoundly mystical.

### IV. JUDAISM IN PARTHIAN BABYLONIA

I have mostly refrained from offering an opinion on either the technical or the interpretive issues at hand. I am not qualified to do so. However, having given considerable attention to the Jews in Parthian Babylonia,<sup>5</sup> I am qualified to describe what we know

<sup>5</sup> Full documentation of the various factual statements made below will be found in my *Jews in Parthian Babylonia* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, Studia Post-biblica, to appear in 1964-65), and I have not reproduced it here. I have discussed

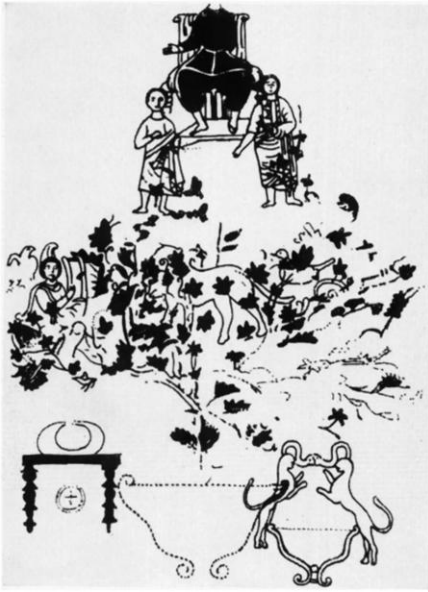


FIG. 1.—Orpheus-David playing to the animals. Dura Europos synagogue reredos, sketch by H.-J. Gude. All illustrations are from Erwin R. Goodenough, *Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue*, *Jewish Symbols in Greco-Roman Times*, Vol. XI (New York, 1964)

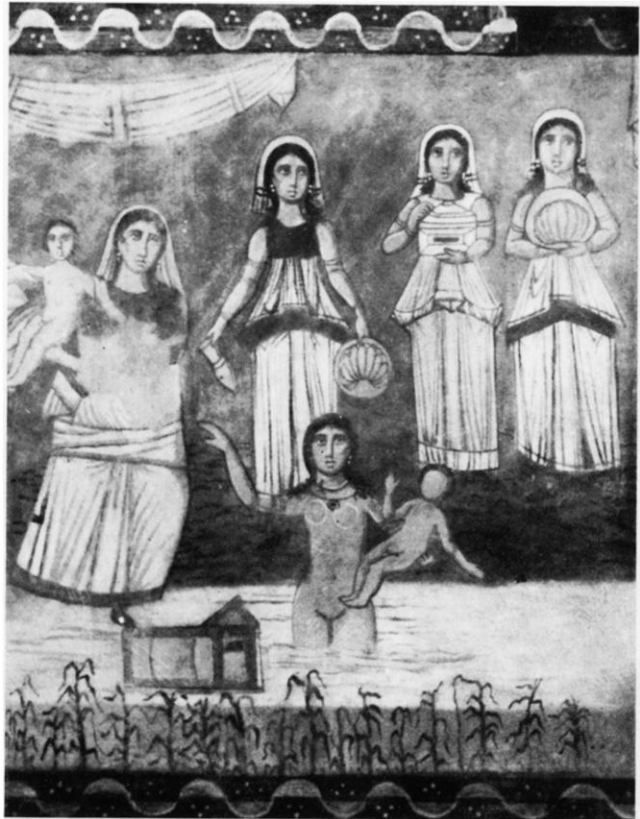


FIG. 2.—The infancy of Moses. Sketch by Gude



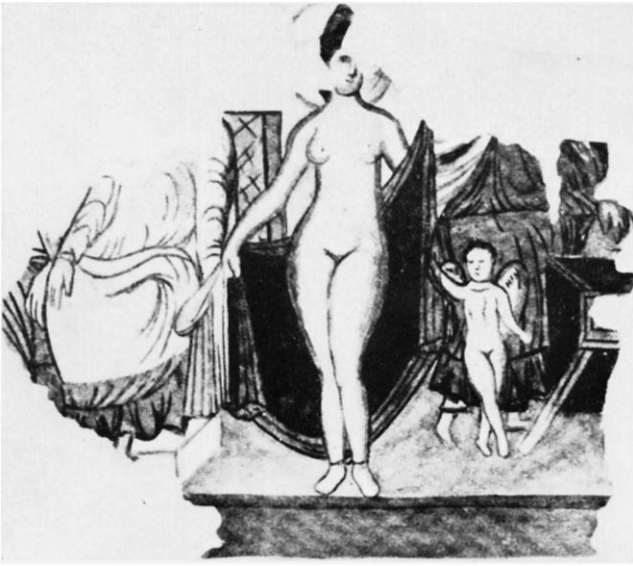


FIG. 3.—Aphrodite with cupid, from a private house in Dura

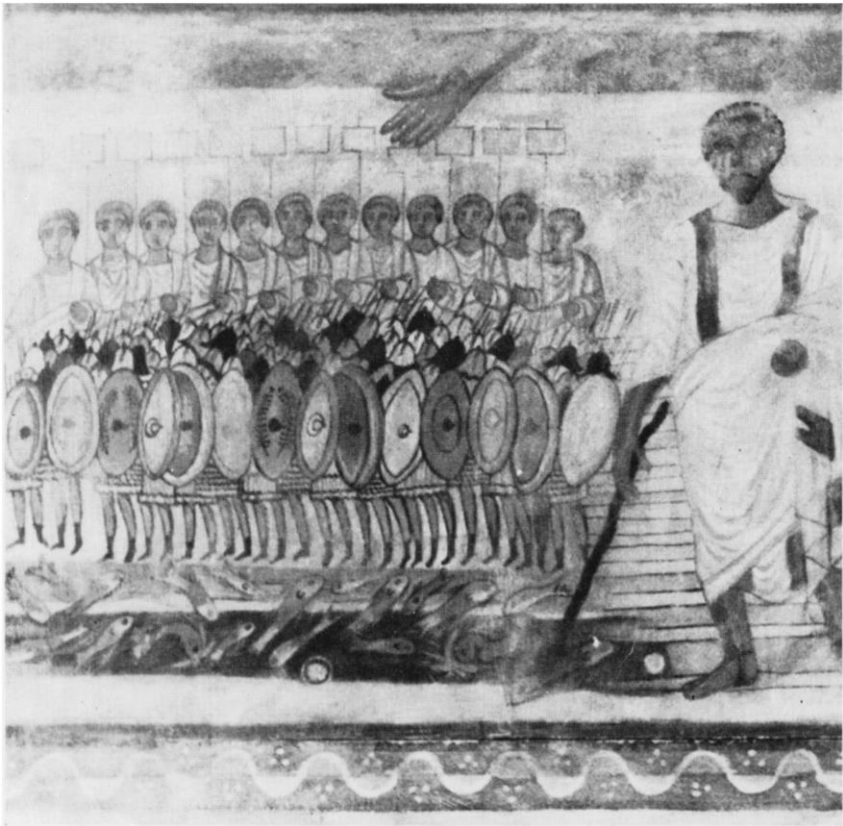


FIG. 4.—Moses leads the migration from Egypt. Sketch of WA3 by Gude



FIG. 5.—Moses with a wand. From the catacomb Via Latina, Rome



FIG. 6.—Theseus conquers the Minotaur, from the Basilica at Herculaneum, National Museum, Naples.

—which is very little—of their religious life and to suggest, in the light of this, why I believe that this evidence lends greater support to the approach of Goodenough than to that of Kraeling.

Both Goodenough and Kraeling accept the conventional view of Babylonian Judaism. It is normally portrayed as a wholly isolated legalistic and law-abiding religion, deeply engaged by its own interests and traditional concerns, and wholly divorced from the surrounding culture. Goodenough describes Babylonian Jewry as an island, a cultural ghetto (IX, 8–10), where the Jews occupied themselves in the study of the law in its most halakhic sense, while the Dura community, “engulfed” by the pagan world, was far more deeply influenced by pagan culture. Kraeling, likewise, views Babylonian Jewry as living in towns predominantly Jewish (p. 325) and generally loyal to the halakhah as it was later recorded.

The conventional view is based on a conflation of all information, early or late, into a static and one-dimensional portrait. What we know about the Jews in Babylonia before 226 does not support this view. It contradicts it. The evidence is, to the contrary, that the Jews in Babylonia lived in relatively close contact, both physical and cultural, with their neighbors. Their main center, Nehardea, was not far from the great Hellenistic city, Seleucia on the Tigris; and in any case, Greeks, Babylonians, Pagan Semites, Jews, and Parthians all inhabited the narrow strip of fertile land around the Royal Canal which later historians so generously assigned to the Jews alone. We know, for example, that in the first century, when the Jewish barony of Anileus and Asineus was established, the local Greeks and Babylonians opposed it and eventually succeeded in gaining Parthian support to destroy it, but that, for a time, the two brothers ruled *both* Jewish *and* Hellenistic and Babylonian populations, all in a relatively small area around, but apparently not including, Nehardea itself. (And there were Greeks in Nehardea.) It should be emphasized, therefore, that the Jews were only one minority in the region, and, so far as one may guess, they were not the most numerous. Furthermore, the Greek city of Seleucia contained a Hellenized Jewish population.

Not only were Babylonian Jews in the Parthian period *not* physically isolated from others in the region, but there is evidence

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other aspects of issues posed by Goodenough's studies in “Notes on Goodenough's *Jewish Symbols*,” *Conservative Judaism*, XVII (1963), 77–92; and “Jewish Use of Pagan Symbols,” *Journal of Religion*, XLIII, 4 (1963), 285–94.

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that some Jews significantly participated in Parthian political and economic life. For example, in the first century B.C., Zamaris, a Jew from Babylonia who had mastered the Parthian shot, fled to the west and settled in Palestine. According to Josephus' account, Zamaris was a feudal lord in Parthia and fled on account of an unhappy turn in local politics. He was, moreover, not the only Jew to master Parthian military tactics. A century and a half later, we have some evidence that Jews took Parthian names, one, Arta/Arda, being a good Parthian translation of the Hebrew Zadoq, the other Pylybaryš, meaning possibly "elephant rider"; they wore Parthian noble garb; and exerted influence with the government and were probably, therefore, also familiar with the language of the court. Moreover, we know that at least one Tanna from Babylonia, R. Ħiyya, visited the Parthian court; and that a Parthian governmental title, PĦTY, meaning satrap, was applied by him, at the very least as a term of endearment (though I think more) to his nephew Rav. We may, moreover, be fairly certain that good "normative" Jews, in particular R. Ħiyya, participated in the international silk trade, which was closely supervised by the Parthian government and hence must have had commercial dealings with that government. We know that a Jewish civil authority, the exilarch, was recognized by the Parthian government and exerted *de jure* authority over Jews in the second century, if not before; and we know that he was given, as an insignia of office, the right to wear the *kamara*, a *ceinture* which signified governmental recognition. Thus the evidence, very briefly summarized here, points to extensive Jewish participation in Parthian affairs. Participation in political, commercial, and possibly military affairs could not have been carried on by people "wholly isolated" from the culture of the government. One should expect to find among them substantial marks of knowledge of surrounding culture. Not the least of the contacts of the Jewish masses with that culture would have been through the coinage, which certainly yielded some information on the pagan religion of the Iranian Empire, and on the local Semitic and Hellenistic cults as well. It is too much to conclude that political, commercial, and military contacts had led to the utter assimilation of Babylonian Jewry into Parthian culture; and I do not for one instant believe that Babylonian Jewry in the mass had done so. But one ought not to be surprised to find traces of Parthian (and hence Parthian-Hellenistic) influence on Babylonian Jewry. I should expect to see similar influences in Dura, a town held by Parthia until *circa* 160 A.D. and should be

astonished to find no knowledge of Iranian culture half a century later in such a place.

It is frequently asserted, moreover, that Babylonian Jewry was dominated at this period by Palestinian Judaism. This cannot be demonstrated. The evidence is this. Before the Bar Kokhba war, there were two or three Tannaim in all of Mesopotamia, one Judah b. Bathyra in Nisibis, another, Ḥananiah, the nephew of R. Joshua in the south, in Nehardea. This same Ḥananiah, moreover, engaged in an action which, if successful, would have resulted in the freedom of Babylonian Jews from Palestinian domination of the sacred calendar, one of the chief means by which the Palestinian patriarch exerted influence in the diaspora. If "normative" Tannaitic Judaism was otherwise represented in the east, we have absolutely no record of it. (We shall see below evidences of something quite different.) At the time, and as a direct consequence of the Bar Kokhba war, some Palestinian Tannaim fled to Mesopotamia. The students of R. Akiba settled in the north, in Nisibis, while those of R. Ishmael settled in Huḏal, so far as I can tell a town near Nehardea, in the south. The former returned to Palestine, probably by 145 A.D., but the latter remained in Babylonia and trained students such as R. Aḥai, Issi b. Judah, Ḥiyya and Rav, who later achieved distinction in the Palestinian academies. Thus only in 135 at the very earliest do we have a well-established Tannaitic academy across the Euphrates; and before that time there was, so far as we can tell, no means by which Pharisaic-Tannaitic traditions might be transmitted in the east in a systematic, orderly, continuing way. I have contended that the basis of certain sections of the Mekhilta was laid in Huḏal between 135 and 150; but this is the only record we have, if that, indeed, is accepted, of production of Tannaitic literature in Babylonia. I fail utterly, therefore, to see how Babylonian or Mesopotamian Judaism was under Palestinian religious and cultural hegemony. *So far as we know*, Babylonian Jewry was not dominated by Pharisaic Judaism.

In fact, we have some reason to believe that Babylonian Jewry had an indigenous tradition of its own. We know very, very little about pre-Amoraic Babylonian Judaism. But what we know points to a kind of Judaism deeply affected by Ezekiel and probably also engaged (at least in the sophisticated centers) by the merkavah tradition. These points cannot be overemphasized. The bottom register of the north wall of the Dura synagogue was covered by an Ezekiel cycle. Goodenough has argued, moreover,

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that elements of merkavah mysticism may be discerned in the reredos and elsewhere (see X, 70–71, 87, 178 [on the Ezekiel cycle] and elsewhere). It seems to me entirely natural that Ezekiel, and the kind of mysticism based upon his prophecies, should have been well represented through Babylonia, where he allegedly prophesied, and where his traditions were, in any case, probably cultivated from the earliest times as those of a local and indigenous prophet. The evidence that Ezekiel studies, including the merkavah aspect of them, were important in the Babylonian academies is, like every other kind of evidence on Babylonian Judaism in Parthian times, very slender. Yet the fact is that most of what we know about the kinds of *midrash agadah* pursued in these academies concerns the book of Ezekiel, merkavah mysticism, or verses from other books which were related to merkavah mysticism. We do not, as I said, know very much; but all that we do know relates to this single prophet, except for the evidences in Mekhilta, and the sayings of men such as R. Nathan and the Ishmaelites, who were trained in Palestine as well as in Babylonia. For example, we have one teaching of R. Hamnuna the Scribe of Babylonia. A student of his, R. Ḥanina b. Ḥama, corrected the reading of R. Judah, the prince of Ezekiel 7:16, and that particular verse had eschatological significance in the midrashic tradition. By itself this proves nothing. But we also know that when Levi b. Sisi preached in Babylonia, he preached on Ezekiel. When R. Ḥiyya, a Babylonian, was in Palestine, he pursued esoteric lore based on Ezekiel 1, the merkavah vision. A saying of Levi relates, also, to the Shiur Qoma tradition (to which Goodenough makes reference, if only tentatively). Furthermore, Scholem<sup>6</sup> cites a saying of the above-mentioned R. Ḥananiah, the nephew of R. Joshua, which indicates familiarity with Jewish mystical tradition. Finally, it is well known that the first-century Tanna, Hillel, a Babylonian, transmitted a mystical tradition in his academy. (His disciple, R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, was a leading exponent of the merkavah tradition in the decades before and after the destruction of Jerusalem.) When Rav came to Babylonia at the beginning of the third century, he brought further elements of Jewish mystical tradition. When the father of Samuel and Levi experienced the *Shekhinah* in the synagogue in Nehardea, that experience was described in terms used by Ezekiel. This much is therefore beyond question: In the light of the findings of Scholem and others, on the

<sup>6</sup> See G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (N.Y., 1960), p. 56.

existence of a mystical tradition as evidenced by Hillel the Babylonian, and in the early second century by Ḥananiah the nephew of R. Joshua (and possibly Yosi of Huṣal, but this involves variant readings in the Mishnah), and in the light of the later second- and early third-century evidence alluded to above, there can be no doubt that the curriculum of Babylonian Jewish academies at the beginning of the third century included some kind of mystical tradition, and that speculation, specifically, on Ezekiel's vision was carried on.

With this in mind, I find it very difficult to question the importance ascribed by Goodenough to mysticism in Dura. I do not argue that his interpretations are, in detail, correct, for I am not competent to make a judgment on that question. But I do think that the importance of Ezekiel in Dura, and the details, if correctly discerned, of various kinds of traditional mystical speculation, which Goodenough finds on the walls of Dura synagogue, are both wholly *congruent* to what we know of Babylonian Judaism before *circa* 220 A.D. One should not be surprised to find some kind of syncretistic, mystical tradition in Jewish Dura. Considering the situation of the Jews there, and considering what we know of the religious culture of the Jews in Babylonia, who probably exerted some influence there, and who may have, in the beginning, provided the first Jewish settlers in Dura, one should have *expected* to find something approximating the Judaism discerned by Goodenough, specifically a kind of Judaism in which Ezekiel plays a very important role and in which the mystical speculations associated in part with his writings are represented, just as they were in the academies to the south.

Goodenough and Namenyi (IX, 9) hold that "Dura would have represented Babylonian Judaism before the halakhic reform." I cannot doubt that Dura largely as interpreted by Goodenough would be at least a fair approximation of Babylonian Judaism before the great expansion of Pharisaic-Tannaitic-Amoraic Judaism in the period after Rav's coming. What, exactly, happened after Rav's coming I cannot say. But since Rav was a mystic, I am fairly certain that it did not involve the suppression of earlier mystical traditions but, more likely, their refinement and cultivation. Rav brought with him from Palestine (assuming that his mystical sayings were not acquired *before* his migration to R. Judah's court) a considerable body of mysticism.

Even if Rav had wanted to suppress mysticism, moreover, whether he could have done so in Dura-Europos before the time



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of the paintings in the middle of the fifth decade may be questioned. He allegedly came *circa* 226. When he came, he found observance of the law abysmal and founded an academy to stand alongside of Samuel's as an exemplar of how the law should be observed, and to send forth teachers of the law to effect a reform throughout Babylonian and (one assumes) Mesopotamian Jewry. It is difficult to believe that in two decades his influence would have reached Dura, or that if it had, it would have worked to destroy mysticism there! It is difficult, therefore, to follow Kraeling in believing that a wholly ethically centered, and wholly "biblically and historically" centered Judaism prevailed in Dura.

One must, in any event, wonder how much influence the anti-mystical Pharisaic-Tannaitic-Amoraic attitude actually had in Dura. So far as we know, that community would have been influenced by it, if at all, only through the sermons of itinerant apostles of the patriarchate. Yet, as we noted above, one of the few sermons we know about was Levi ben Sisi's, and this concerned mysticism. If the Palestinian antimystical tradition was to influence Dura Judaism, that influence could only have been exerted after *circa* 160 A.D., when the city fell into Roman hands. Before that time, Dura was under Parthian rule. The Parthians did not allow Roman government officials, such as the Palestinian patriarch, to govern their minority groups. They were, on the contrary, careful to establish their own minority representatives where needed, as in the case of the exilarchate. One is reduced, therefore, to the necessity of arguing that between 160 and 240, the antecedent Judaism of Mesopotamia was obliterated at Dura and that in its place a one-dimensional, opaque religion was substituted. I should not be convinced by such an argument.

How then may we understand the great redecoration of the Dura synagogue, which took place *circa* 245 A.D.? In my opinion, one must see it in the context of the state of religions generally in early Sasanid Iran. The redecoration of the synagogue represents, according to both Kraeling and Goodenough, an act of tremendous religious creativity as the response of an extraordinary mind to the Jewish tradition, whether (Kraeling) to the rabbinic tradition alone or (Goodenough) to the tradition as modulated by current ideas and attitudes. No era in the history of religions was more diverse or creative than the early middle third century, and no place ever exhibited greater variety or vitality than Mesopotamia. When we consider the maelstrom of religious activity in this brief period, we may see extraordinary signs of creativity and vitality.

In the small region, a parallelogram of no more than 200 miles in length and 50 in breadth, we find the following: first, and most important, the resurgence of a conquering, proselytizing Mazdeism, propagated by the state under Ardashir, and established (if in a tolerant manner) as the state religion under Shahpuhr with its exponent, Kartir; second, the development of an Iranian gnostic syncretism by the prophet Mani, who, at the time of the redecoration of the Dura synagogue, proclaimed a new religion and in the next decades attracted a wide following in Iran and in the Roman Empire as well; third, the advance of Christianity (Mani's father was probably a Christian, and Jesus played a part in his theology) into the Mesopotamian valley from Edessa, where, by 201, it had become well established; fourth, the great expansion of cults within the Iranian idiom, in particular Mithraism, in both Iran and the Roman Empire, to the point where Mithraism was perhaps the single most popular religion on the Roman side of the frontier; fifth, and by no means least, the beginnings of a revolution in Babylonian Judaism, which transformed the earlier indigenous religion into a fair representation of the ideas of the Palestinian Tannaim (this much we may obviously say, but no more), and which must have created a tremendous upheaval in Babylonian Jewry. These events, each of them of lasting importance in the religious life of Mesopotamia, took place within a brief period; one may say that from *circa* 220 to *circa* 250 in Babylonia Manichaeism, Rabbinic Judaism and Mazdeism were all taking form. To such events, Dura's Jewish philosopher might well have responded, as Goodenough says he did, by a series of symbolic comments on the religions of the day and on Judaism's superiority to all of them.

Furthermore it seems wholly unlikely that an intense, well-informed devotion to the established traditions of Judaism in Dura, or for that matter anywhere in Babylonia, *precluded* very thoughtful and serious consideration of the religious ideas of the other ethnic groups in the region and town. I find no evidences of particularly close contact between Babylonian and Palestinian Judaism before 200, except in the academies established about 135 by the émigrés in Huzal and perhaps elsewhere. The influence of these academies over the next three-quarters of a century could not have been very widespread if Rav, upon his return, found things as "decadent" as he did. I find no reason, finally, to assume that Dura Jewry had either close contact with Babylonia or none at all, but I do find it significant that the substantial attention

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given to Ezekiel is approximately similar to that given to him in the southern academies according to the little we know about them; more than this I cannot say.

Emphasizing that my judgment is a historical one and is not offered in reference to the detailed, substantive interpretations of the paintings, I conclude that Goodenough's method and approach to the problem of Dura Judaism, and his consequent description of it, are congruent to what we know about Judaism in Parthian Babylonia, slight though that knowledge may be, while Kraeling's contradicts it.